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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of leadership by college deans, proposes a definition of academic leadership, and assesses the degree to which deans exhibit the behaviors embedded in academic leadership. Drawing on the literature, a definition of academic leadership was constructed. Academic leadership is the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff. This definition presupposes that there are three activities deans must perform to lead effectively: (1) building a community of scholars; (2) setting direction; and (3) empowering others. In 1997, the National Survey of Deans in Higher Education used the responses of a sample of deans (population of 1,370; response rate of 60%) to build a database of opinions, beliefs, and reported activities. Deans were asked to indicate behaviors that characterized their practice. Overall, deans were found to be balanced in their approaches to leadership, with deans in comprehensive universities more likely to describe themselves as community builders than deans in research universities. In addition, it appears that years in the position take a toll on deans. After about year 10, deans tend to disengage in direction setting behavior, a finding that may have implications for institutional development. (SLD)

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An Investigation of Dean Leadership

"Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (Burns, 1978, p. 2). In institutions of higher education, even the development of leaders has received little attention (Astin & Astin, 2000). The literature, however, is replete with books, articles, and commentaries on leadership increasing at an exponential rate over the past two decades. Two of the most prolific writers on leadership, Bennis and Nanus, concluded, however, that "books on leadership are often as majestically useless as they are pretentious" and insisted that they did not want "to further muddle the bewildering melange of leadership definitions" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 20). The pages logged under the heading of leadership make the work almost impossible to track for scholars of leadership theory and incomprehensible for deans attempting to practice it.

In this paper we do not attempt to recount theories or recite definitions. Instead, we provide an overview of leadership, propose a definition of academic leadership, and assess the degree to which deans exhibit the behaviors imbedded in academic leadership.

Overview of Leadership

The problem with most approaches to leadership is that they have emphasized what is (1) *peripheral* to the nature of leadership and (2) limited to the *content* of leadership in particular professions (Rost, 1993). Over the decades, traditional leadership scholars and theories have been predominantly focused on the *peripheries* of leadership: traits, personality characteristics, goal attainment, effectiveness, contingencies, situations, and style. On the *content* level, they emphasize what leaders need to know about a particular profession or

institution in order to influence it. The content of leading focuses on understanding human behavior, professional practices, environmental needs, future trends, and the latest leadership theories. The result –"leadership scholars have spilled much ink on the peripheral elements surrounding leadership and its content instead of on the nature of leadership as a process, on leadership viewed as a dynamic relationship. . . the process whereby leaders and followers relate to one another to achieve a purpose"(Rost, 1993, p. 4).

Scholars have also been biased by their disciplinary perspectives. Most of the people who call themselves leadership scholars study leadership in one academic discipline or profession: Bailey (1988) in anthropology, Bass (1985) in social psychology, Selznick (1957) in sociology, Sergiovanni (1990) in education, Birnbaum (1990) in higher education, Schein (1991) in organizational development, Tucker (1981) in political science, and Zaleznik (1989) and Kouzes and Posner (1993), along with a host of others in business, write primarily for corporate executives. In contrast, examples of multidiscipinary scholars who have written books on leadership are still somewhat rare. Of these, Burns (1978) is probably most widely read but others who have significantly contributed to the interdisciplinary approach are Helgesen (1995), Gardner (1990), Greenleaf (1977), Maccoby (1981), Kellerman (1999), Heifetz (1994), Rost (1993), Wheatly (1992), Conger and Benjamin (1999) and Bennis (1999). Some, Peters and Waterman (1982) for instance, have developed a more generalized view of leadership that reaches across professions although they are more noted for their studies of business leadership.

Since 1978, two rubrics have dominated the scholarly work on leadership--transactional and transformational (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders are viewed as directing and

having personal impact on their colleagues (followers) and are sought after as a source of motivation and inspiration. In contrast, transactional theory defines leadership as a reciprocal process of social exchange between leaders and followers. Bensimon and her colleagues believe that even though the transformational perspective on leadership in higher education "enjoys rhetorical support, it is an approach that in many ways may not be compatible with the ethos, values, and organizational features of colleges and universities" (1989, p. 74). They postulate that while transformational theory is seductive, transactional theory may be more characteristic of leadership on most campuses. Deans, as leaders, may in fact fall into either one of these two camps or in both where it may be a matter of degree rather than an either/or situation (Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez & Nies, 2001). Although the hierarchical structure, reward systems, and tenure and promotion processes favor a transactional approach to leadership, our study supports the view of deans as somewhat transformational as they work with their faculty and colleagues.

Academic Leadership Defined

Based on a synthesis of Burns' transactional and transformational leadership and other attempts at defining leadership, (Rost, 1991; Gardner, 1986; Greenleaf, 1977), we posit the following definition of academic leadership: *Academic leadership is the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff.* This definition presupposes three conditions deans must meet if they are to effectively lead their colleges.

Building a community of scholars. Building a community of scholars means moving away from a more "autocratic" control of a collection of "independent" faculty members toward

the collaborative leadership of a community of scholars (Wolverton, Gmelch & Sorenson, 1998). The college becomes a community where faculty not only are loyal and dedicated to their discipline but work equally in the cause of the college. Thus, the college becomes a place where faculty go beyond their disciplinary loyalties and view their colleges as academic homes, places of identification, support, camaraderie, and social responsibility (Pew Policy Perspective, 1996).

In turn, deans involve others in new ideas and projects, support effective coordination by working cooperatively with others, and make faculty feel a part of the group or college. A sense of caring marks an environment in which deans are concerned about the feelings of others, treat others with respect, and communicate feelings as well as ideas. It is an interpersonal relationship that depends on multi-dimensional, non-coercive influences. These reciprocal influences are based on the ability of deans to establish a sense of community, a team of academics among and with faculty and staff, through their personal rather than positional power. While such a team orientation is necessary, it is also clear that deans must take responsibility for moving their colleges forward toward a common purpose, thus the second condition of academic leadership.

Setting Direction. Understanding why we exist and what it is that we want to accomplish, as a college does not automatically happen. Faculty do not necessarily wake up one morning and say to themselves, "Collectively, as a college, this is where we want to be in five years and here's how we're going to get there." While faculty need to be actively involved in planning for the college's future, deans must encourage, direct, and inspire their academic colleagues to move toward these common goals. In order to set direction, they must

communicate a clear sense of priorities, encourage others to share their ideas of the future, collaborate with others in defining a vision, and be oriented toward action (transformational leadership) rather than the status quo (transactional leadership). Common purposes that define future direction cannot be realized, however, if faculty and staff are not empowered to achieve the desired results.

Empowering Others. Bennis points out that empowerment is the collective effect of leadership (1990). Deans demonstrate empowerment by making faculty feel significant and part of the community, valuing learning and competence, engaging faculty in exciting work, providing resources needed to do a good job, making expectations clear, helping faculty get the knowledge and skills needed to perform effectively, recognizing and rewarding faculty for effective performance, and sharing power and influence with others. In essence, academic leadership empowers others to effect change.

Assessment of Deans as Leaders

We believe that deans as leaders should be actively engaged in each of these three endeavors. To assess whether they exhibited the qualities reflected in our definition of academic leadership, the Center for the Study of Academic leadership established baseline data of information about deans in the United States. The resulting database included deans' perception of the degree to which specific behaviors characterized their practice of leadership.

Methodology. In 1997 academic deans in the United States were mailed the *National Survey of Academic Deans in Higher Education* (Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Hermanson, 1996). The following criteria were used to construct the sample. Potential sample institutions came from one of the following three groupings of Carnegie classifications –

Research I & II and Doctoral I & II; Masters I & II; or Baccalaureate I & II. In order to make comparisons of institutions across Carnegie classifications, we attempted to control for some of the differentiation that exists across categories. To do this we limited the potential institutional population to those universities that had four colleges in common. From this initial group of colleges and universities, 60 public and 60 private institutions were randomly selected from each Carnegie category, resulting in a sample of 360 institutions. At each of the sample institutions, the deans of the colleges of education, business, liberal arts, and allied health professions were then asked to complete the survey. In a few instances, colleges of social work or a similar discipline were also included in the survey. Based on experiences gained in survey research done on department chairs where 10% of the sample were women, researchers made the assumption that a similar pattern would reveal itself in deans if a completely random sample were collected. As a consequence, in a purposeful attempt to increase the number of female respondents, we included colleges of nursing and public health. The overall sample size consisted of 1,370 deans, with a response rate of 60%. The survey packed included a cover letter and a business reply envelope. The major aspects of the Dillman (1978) *Total Design Method* were used in the design and distribution of the survey.

Research instruments used I the survey included the Dean's Stress Inventory (Gmelch et al., 1966), Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Questionnaire (Rizzo et al., 1970), Dean's Task Inventory (Gmelch et al., 1996), Satisfaction with Dean's Role (Gmelch et al., 1996), Dean's Leadership Inventory (Rosenbach & Sashkin, 1995) and demographic and contextual variables. For use in this paper the Dean's Leadership Inventory developed by Rosenbach and Sashkin was modified and assessed along with selected demographic and contextual variables.

Analysis. To assess whether deans exhibited the qualities reflected in our definition of academic leadership, we asked deans in our study to indicate the degree to which specific behavior characterized their practice. Using the SPSS statistical package (Noruis, 1994) we constructed three scales of dean leadership. Table 1 displays the eight-item scales, which approximate each of the three leadership dimensions -- community building, setting direction and empowering others.

Insert Table 1

Each dimension consists of eight items. Each item was rated on a one (low) to five (high) scale regarding to what extent each statement characterized their behavior. A composite score, ranging from eight to 40, was calculated for each dimension. Figure 1 plots the average combined scores for all the deans on each of the three individual dimensions. Mean scores for each of the qualities of dean leadership were consistently high (33 to 34) with the actual scores ranging from 21 to 40. These results may stem from the fact that all three dimensions were strongly correlated with their perceptions of leadership effectiveness, and deans in the study, for the most part, believed that they were effective leaders. On average, they reported leadership effectiveness ratings of 4.1 and 4.2 on a five-point scale for men and women, respectively. If, as we surmise, all three conditions are essential components of academic leadership and deans believed themselves to be good leaders, then it is not surprising that their ratings were strong and balanced across the dimensions.

Insert Figure 1

When comparing sub-populations some statistically significant differences were found (see Table 2). Female deans consistently scored higher than male deans on building

community, empowering others, and setting direction. These findings are consistent with other research supporting the supposition that women tend to be more relational and transformational in their leadership style as compared to men who sometimes favor a more competitive, transactional style (Helgesen, 1995). Minority status deans also scored significantly higher than majority deans. However, the differences between men and women and minority and majority deans are not practically different enough (one to two points on a 32 point scale) to suggest we would observe differences in dean leadership behaviors.

Insert Table 2

The degree to which deans view themselves as administrators, academic faculty members, or both as administrators and faculty members also have a statistically significant impact on their perceptions of their leadership qualities. Deans who still see themselves primarily as faculty members did not rate themselves as strongly on the dimension of setting direction for the college (mean score of 32) as those who saw themselves primarily as administrators (mean score of 34). Those who perceive themselves as both administrator and faculty members showed no significant difference on any of the dimensions of leadership qualities. If deans planned to return to faculty positions in the near future, they were less likely to engage in any of the three leadership dimensions than other deans. A somewhat disconcerting finding suggests that some deans may over stay their welcome. Deans who had been in their positions for ore than ten years were typically less likely to be enthusiastic about setting direction for their colleges. Perhaps, deans over time become complacent, or lose touch with the current realities of their colleges, or believe that a direction set is a direction written in stone that needs no future revision, or maybe they simply get tired.

To what extent does institutional culture or disciplinary orientation influence deans' leadership attributes? The only differences found among deans with regard to institutional type was with respect to "community building," which appeared to be stronger in comprehensive universities and less prevalent among deans at research universities (Table 3). Given the nature of research universities, where cultivating independent scholars with aggressive personal research agendas is paramount to establishing a college's reputation, it seems reasonable that deans at research universities may be working more with a *collection* of scholars than the *communities* of scholars we find at comprehensive universities. Again, these statistically statistical differences represent tendencies, not necessarily practical differences.

Insert Table 3

Previous research on faculty suggests that many of their academic behaviors are discipline-specific. It appears that deans, socialized as faculty into different disciplinary cultures, also exhibit differences in their leadership attributes. When deans were compared across colleges, several statistically significant trends emerged (Table 3). Education deans were significantly more engaged in the behaviors that contribute to each of the three attributes of building community, setting direction, and empowering others than were the deans of the other colleges. In contrast, business deans rated each of the three attributes significantly less characteristic of their behavior as deans than did their counterparts in other colleges. This dichotomous observation leaves room for speculation and discussion regarding cultural differences between colleges of business and education. Liberal arts and sciences deans were less apt to set direction but more likely to empower others. Setting direction seemed more characteristic of nursing deans than of other deans.

With regard to the deans' motivation to serve, those who were "other-oriented" (chose to be a dean in order to "contribute to and improve the college" or "influence the development of the faculty") favored the leadership attributes of setting direction and empowering others more than did other deans. Finally, deans' perceptions of job satisfaction were moderately correlated with the attribute of empowering others.

Implications

While most of the research has been aimed at understanding the peripheral aspects and content of leadership, our investigation of deans focused on understanding the essential nature of leading a college--the process whereby deans and faculty relate to one another through the dimensions of community building, setting direction, and empowerment. Indeed, deans were not found to be monolithic but balanced in their approach to leadership.

Institutionally, deans in comprehensive universities described themselves as more community builders than did deans in research universities. As one might expect, it may be more difficult for deans to "herd cats" and get them to go in the same direction at research universities where faculty expect a greater degree of freedom and autonomy. As cultures vary in institutions of higher education, so might the requirements for and expectations of deans. The right job fit may be an important consideration for both deans and universities.

Previous studies of faculty have shown that such behaviors as stress, goal setting, and satisfaction vary according to disciplinary differences (Creswell, et al. 1990; Gmelch, Lovrich & Wilke, 1984; McLaughlin, et al. 1975). In contrast to faculty, academic leaders (department chairs and deans) across disciplines are more alike than different when compared by discipline (Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton & Sarros, 1999; Wolverton,

Wolverton & Gmelch, 1999). Still, in this study education deans reported statistically stronger leadership behavior in setting direction, empowering others, and building community than did deans from other colleges. While the absolute differences in their scores reported in Table 2 may not result in differences in leadership styles, it does reflect the potential influence of the deans' disciplinary backgrounds on their approach to leadership.

Finally, it appears that years in the position take their toll on deans. If the challenges of the position continue to expand and become more complex, year ten in a dean's career may prove to be a turning point of sorts. After this juncture, deans seem to disengage from "direction setting" that could prove crucial to the well being of their colleges. Such disenfranchisement may simply signal a need for change in their careers—a move back to faculty or a move into another type of administrative position. This decision should not be left to chance if universities and colleges hope to develop their next generation of leaders.

References available on request from authors

Table 1: Academic Leadership Defined		
Building Community	**Setting Direction**	**Empowering Others**
I show I care about others. I show concern for the feelings of others. I involve others in new ideas and projects. I support effective coordination by working cooperatively with others. I communicate feelings as well as ideas. I treat others with respect regardless of position. I provide opportunities for people to share ideas and information. I make others feel a real part of the group or organization.	I communicate a clear sense of priorities. I encourage others to share their ideas of the future. I engage others to collaborate in defining a vision. I willingly put myself out front to advance group goals. I have plans that extend beyond the immediate future. I am oriented toward actions rather than maintaining the status quo. I consider how a specific plan of action might be extended to benefit others. I act on the basis that what I do will have an impact.	I make sure people have the resources they need to do a good job. I reward people fairly for their efforts. I provide information people need to effectively plan and do their work. I recognize and acknowledge good performance. I help people get the knowledge and skills they need to perform effectively. I express appreciation when people perform well. I make sure that people know what to expect in return for accomplishing goals. I share power and influence with others.

Figure 1

Qualities of Dean Leadership

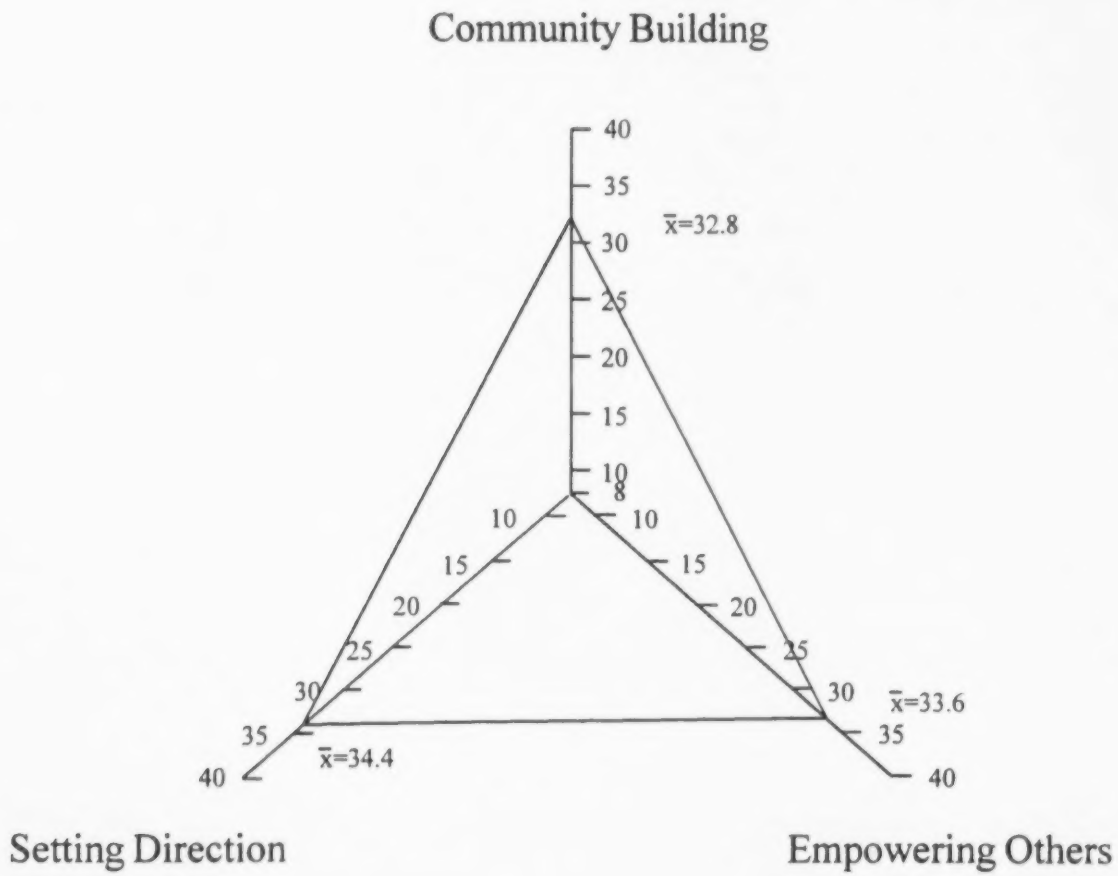

Table 2: Dean :Leadership Qualities					
	Overall Mean (n = 749)	Men	Women	Minority	Majority
Building Community	34.4	33.8	35.2***	35.2**	34.3
Setting Direction	33.6	33.0	34.4***	34.4**	33.5
Empowering Others	32.8	32.3	33.5***	33.9**	32.7

**p*-value ≥ .05
***p*-value ≥ .001

Figure 3: Dean Leadership Qualities by Type of Institution and College			
	Building Community	Setting Direction	Empowering Others
Type of Institution			
Research	33.9**	33.7	32.5
Comprehensive	34.7*	33.7	33.0
Baccalaureate	34.5	33.3	32.9
College (Discipline)			
Arts & Sciences	34.4	32.8***	32.4**
Business	33.4***	33.1*	33.2**
Education	34.9**	34.2***	33.3**
Nursing	34.6	34.3***	33.2

*p-value ≥ .10
**p-value ≥ .05
***p-value ≥ .001